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# The Potter from Lucerne: An Archeological Fantasy

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## REFERENCES

Frédéric Paul, *Giuseppe Penone : archéologie*, Arles : Actes Sud, 2014

## EDITOR'S NOTE

*Giuseppe Penone, archéologie* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2014), which “The Potter from Lucerne, An Archeological Fantasy” is taken from, is an inspired and inspiring book. Frédéric Paul’s writing style echoes one of the Italian artist’s fundamental ideas: the “stupor”, which is “this ability to be surprised and amazed by the things and the world” (p. 13). The close proximity that exists between the text and Penone’s art is touching. It certainly results from this “great bond” shared by the author and the sculptor, which is mentioned in the back cover text.

Most of the artworks studied in the book are from the end of the 1960s and the 1970s. It is, indeed, in Giuseppe Penone’s beginnings that Frédéric Paul goes looking for these “multiple underlying themes” (p. 59) that run throughout the sculptor’s work (the relation between man and nature, the imprint, tactile knowledge, the tension between before and after, etc.). His approach is justified by the artist’s consistency since the “inaugural artwork”, *Alpi marittime*, in 1968. Trying to unearth the beginnings unavoidably refers to the practice of archeology, a word that appears next to the artist’s name in the book’s title. Frédéric Paul’s approach skillfully reflects the art of the Italian artist, who, “like an archeologist”, continuously makes us go back in time.

Caroline Levisse

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Giuseppe Penone, *archéologie* (Arles : Actes Sud, 2014), d'où est extrait « Le Potier de Lucerne, fantaisie archéologique », est un livre inspiré et inspirant. L'écriture de Frédéric Paul fait ici écho à une idée fondamentale chez l'artiste italien, celle de la « stupeur » : « cette capacité d'être étonné et émerveillé par les choses et le monde » (p. 13). On est touché par l'étroite proximité qui existe entre le texte et l'œuvre. Elle doit certainement beaucoup à cette « grande complicité » qui lie l'auteur et le sculpteur, mentionnée dans le texte en quatrième de couverture.

La plupart des œuvres étudiées dans l'ouvrage datent de la fin des années 1960 et des années 1970. C'est en effet dans les débuts de Giuseppe Penone que Frédéric Paul va chercher à juste titre ces « multiples fils rouges » (p. 59) qui traversent tout l'art du sculpteur (le rapport entre l'homme et la nature, l'empreinte, la connaissance tactile, la tension entre avant et après, etc.). Son approche est justifiée par la constance de l'artiste depuis l'« œuvre inaugurale », *Alpi marittime*, en 1968. Entreprendre de retrouver les commencements évoque inévitablement l'archéologie, terme apposé au nom de l'artiste dans le titre du recueil. La démarche de Frédéric Paul reflète habilement l'art de l'artiste italien qui, « en archéologue », n'a de cesse de nous faire remonter le temps.

Caroline Levisse

Découvrez la biographie et la bibliographie complètes de Frédéric Paul, critique d'art et docteur en Histoire de l'art, sur [http://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/outils\\_documentaires/critiques\\_d\\_art/336](http://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/outils_documentaires/critiques_d_art/336)

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Frédéric Paul is an art critic and holds a PhD in Art History. To discover his biography and a complete bibliography, click here: [http://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/outils\\_documentaires/critiques\\_d\\_art/336](http://www.archivesdelacritiquedart.org/outils_documentaires/critiques_d_art/336)

- 1 The visitor who discovered Penone's first bronze sculpture at Lucerne's Kunstmuseum in 1977 had no photographs to guide him<sup>1</sup>. In the room where he discovered its four elements there was an intruder, which was, this time, blatantly obvious: an antique ceramic presented on a pedestal, under a plexiglass dome. The four bronze pieces that were surrounding it did not receive such consideration. One was placed on the ground, another in a corner of the room, and yet another was hung on the wall like a console table at the height of a seat; only one element, long and undulated, was fixed to the wall like a painting at eye level. First sculpture in bronze, *Vaso*, 1975, lends itself-also for the first time-to the resources provided by three-dimensional enlargement. And with its form, the element placed in the corner would be the only one to suggest a link with the vase if it wasn't mentioned on the label-these things are not left to chance nowadays, even if it means writing a lot of rubbish on museum walls; the audience should not get lost, they don't have time for that anymore!
- 2 The antique vases that have survived in their entirety are rare. Incidentally, the four bronze pieces evoke this fatal destiny. But that is not the main point. A complex intention never appears with more precision than at the end of its resolution, often diverted by experience: the pleasure of making, the difficulty achieving it, accidents in the process, or irresolution. Works of art especially deviate from the first intentions that motivated artists to produce them; otherwise, they would be reduced to formulas. It is best to consider the final intentions in them.
- 3 All of this originated in Penone's conviction that an ancient object belongs to its time as much as to ours, as long as we are focusing Our attention on it. An archeologist or

historian would reject this practical simultaneity out of principle. For them, the context in which the artifact was produced is the most important, along with the latter's links to current research—if it contributes to scientific progress. Experts would thus be inclined to monopolise it and contest the layman's ability—if not his right—to apprehend it by his own means. On the contrary, as we now know, Penone cultivates the *stupor*. It presupposes that the artistic sensation is universal and timeless, an idea which gets the experts' hackles up. But even though they are inclined to deem Penone's work suspicious because it is appreciated today by a large audience of "ignorant" people, their knowledge is quite superficial. Of course, amateurs who become bold and stick to good common sense while pleading incuriosity should be feared even more!

- 4 Let's *tell* the story of this sculpture in pieces. The Greek vase was offered to Giuseppe by his brother, Giovanni, who is also a sculptor, like their grand-father, Joseph, and their uncle, Louis. Giovanni noticed, in different places on the object, traces of its maker's fingers. The vase is not as well "finished" as it seems. The French adjective "*fruste*", which can say one thing ("about a statue, coat of arms, coin: which presents a relief worn out by time<sup>3</sup>") and the opposite ("which presents a rough relief, badly polished<sup>4</sup>"); this wobbly word is perfectly adapted here. Its archeological connotation is appropriate and its semantic misuse in a general sense is true to reality. The traces left by the potter were of secondary importance to him. For Penone, they became primordial. In what ways is this object—amphora, krater, or *pelike*—of an undetermined age but possibly ancient, antique even, contemporary for his new owner? It is so, precisely because of its lack of *finish*. But this unclosed temporal bracket would not have such importance if it wasn't for Giuseppe's strong preoccupation with the question of the imprint. His brother was not mistaken. Imperfect, the object is alive; it speaks more universally. To add to the imperfection, the vase's authenticity has not been attested. Giovanni found it at a second-hand shop, a flea market—no one remembers exactly—but not at a specialised antique dealer. And when the work of art which it is now a part of was sent abroad to be exhibited, the export declaration was delivered without reservation by the Italian department of Cultural Property, which did not find any archeological significance that would justify a specific protection. But this is not the problem, and it is even one problem less. It is more important to look at the fact that the potter's fingerprint imprints itself on the user's, who, in his turn, leaves his prints as he grabs it. This contact is what counts, and less the object's esthetic interest or the years separating the two gestures.
- 5 "[A] vase is a segment of reality. At the same time, its artistic form leads an existence completely detached and self-contained, for which its material reality is merely the vehicle. [...] reality does make claims upon the vase as an object that is handled [...]. This dual nature of the vase is most decisively expressed in its handle. The handle is the part by which it is grasped, lifted, and tilted; in the handle the vase projects visibly into that real world which relates it to everything external, to an environment that does not exist for the work of art as such<sup>5</sup>." Georg Simmel wrote this text in 1911. No matter how much we will protest—and rightly so—that the conception of the work of art has evolved, how relevant is this reflection today!
- 6 Before being exhibited for the first time in Lucerne, an element of *Vaso* was set in context at Garesio, in the field where the potatoes with a human face will be cultivated two years later. The undulated band, which was intended for a presentation at eye level, was in these circumstances placed outdoors, simply put on the ground so that it stuck to the ground's irregularities. It showed lightly, like a vestige excavated with extreme caution.

Photographs show this ephemeral and private installation. Some feet enter the picture, very close to the bronze: some feet wearing road-mender laced boots and bare feet that could very well have stepped on the extraordinary “discovery” before and even after its exhumation.

- 7 Looking more closely at the four bronze elements we notice that they are all covered with fingerprints on a 1:1 scale. They are superimposed on the potter’s fingerprints, which were enlarged following a meticulous process that deserves to be described. First, the artist does the castings. Some of the traces Penone is interested in measure less than a centimetre on the original. A few drops of liquid plaster are enough for this. Once they have been lifted, the four negatives are sliced up by successive scrubblings with very fine sandpaper, and at each step, adhesive tape is applied to each section in order to retain its trace. Like some architectural cross-sections, the collection of adhesive fragments enables, by enlargement with a projector, the reconstitution of the debris with the greatest accuracy possible. This operation goes through the manufacturing of wooden profiles corresponding to each slice removed by scrubbing, and then, through the superposition of these strips. (Like an image seen in a microscope, one can think of the enlarged fragment as *more faithful* to the initial model, which is invisible to the naked eye; as *more real*, also, in the sense that, contrary to the initial model, it manifests itself visibly in reality.) The new stratified wooden model is covered in wax, in which Penone’s prints are inscribed; and after that comes the traditional foundry work. In the end, the enlarged bronze vase is difficultly readable in its state of fragments with undetermined limits, even if the potter’s prints are accentuated. Penone’s own prints also add to the difficulty, like for *Gli anni dell’albero più uno* [The Tree’s Years plus One], 1969, a sculpture which is an exception among the *Alberi* because of the wax layer applied to the non-peeled wood of this young tree removed from nature.
- 8 “Why do some cultures leave vestiges and others do not?” Penone asked himself this question very early on, while walking through the ridge paths around Gareggio. Firmly determined to discover engravings or some other lithic traces, he had understood that these difficult paths have always attracted men by offering them the fastest ways of navigating in mountainous areas.
- 9 Today, the artist possesses twenty or so ancient objects from the Middle-East, Mesopotamia, Afghanistan... “Nothing coming from the Italian or Greek ground, and too little, he says, to speak of a collection<sup>7</sup>.” At the Documenta 13 in 2012—the fourth one he participated in—some of the statuettes, known as the “Princesses of Bactria”, which were presented with his artworks belonged to him. This was again at the Museum Fridericianum. Only forty to seventy of these composite feminine statuettes are considered authentic—these pieces are very precious. But one of the objects from his collection that Penone is the most attached to is a pin from 2.000 B.C., ornamented with a human figure ploughing a field behind his oxen. And naturally, it is because such an object carries this type of representation that he holds it in such high esteem. “Through the persistence of images, it is the persistence of ideas that I’m interested in<sup>8</sup>.”

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## NOTES

1. Guiseppe Penone: *Bäume, Augen, Haare, Wände, Tongefäss* [Trees, eyes, hair, walls, terracotta pots], curated by Jean-Christophe Ammann, 22 May-26 June 1977.
2. Translator's note: no single word in English would translate "*fruste*" and keep intact the dual meaning that this word has in French. Depending on the context, it would be translated by either "worn" or "rough".
3. French Dictionary: *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Georg Simmel, "The Handle", in "Two Essays", translated from German by Rudolph H. Weingartner, in *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Autumn 1958, p. 371-2 [translation modified].
6. Guiseppe Penone, in a conversation with the author, 13 October 2013 [translated from French].
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*